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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 DHAKA 001121

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SUBJECT: BANGLADESH AWAMI LEAGUE: COMMITTED TO ELECTIONS,
BUT WHAT ABOUT REFORM?

REF: SCA FOR A/S BOUCHER

Classified By: Ambassador James F. Moriarty. Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) Former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina appears in firm control of the Awami League as she prepares to return to Bangladesh to lead the party into Parliamentary elections. Efforts by the military-backed Caretaker Government and her Awami League rivals to topple her have failed, and for now the unified party and its political allies seem to be in a strong electoral position. The key question is whether she will support Government-backed efforts to improve governance within the Awami League and Parliament. Since her release from jail to travel to the United States on medical parole in June, Sheikh Hasina has been Sphinx-like regarding her political plans. Her meeting with Assistant Secretary of State Richard Boucher on October 30 will provide an excellent opportunity to stress the importance of ending the country's political violence and reforming its corruption-prone democracy. Whether she supports at least some reforms will go a long way in determining this populous, Muslim-majority country's prospects for maintaining a stable democracy inhospitable to extremists.

WAITING FOR HASINA, WAITING FOR ELECTIONS

¶2. (C) After languishing in jail for a year on corruption charges and then spending four months abroad on medical parole, Sheikh Hasina is preparing to return to Bangladesh in early November. Her grip on the Awami League remains firm. Efforts by the military-backed Caretaker Government and her rivals within the party to remove her from the leadership of the Awami League have failed. No viable alternative party leader emerged among the members of the Presidium (the party's highest policy-making body) despite the fact that many of them plotted her downfall with military intelligence while she was in jail. The broad political base she inherited from her assassinated father, the first President of Bangladesh, proved resilient in the face of multiple charges of graft leveled by the Government.

¶3. (C) Awami League leaders, including Acting Secretary General Syed Ashraful Islam, have expressed to us confidence the party would participate in Parliamentary elections on December 18 under Sheikh Hasina's leadership despite the party's insistence on numerous preconditions for such participation. The party has demanded Sheikh Hasina receive

bail in her graft cases so that the terms of her release are the same as her arch-nemesis Khaleda Zia, the former prime minister who leads the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP). The party also pressed for the lifting of the State of Emergency even though Awami League leaders privately acknowledged the party benefited from the Emergency regulations. (Note: Under Emergency rules, more BNP politicians convicted of corruption would be barred from running for Parliament than Awami League politicians. End note.) The Awami League leadership further rejected Government plans to hold upazilla (county) elections immediately after the Parliamentary vote. None of these issues appears to be an insurmountable hurdle, however, particularly since Awami League leaders generally believe their party-led alliance will win the election. A formal negotiating session between the Awami League and the Caretaker Government on October 23 ended with both sides saying substantial progress had been made.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR BEFORE THE ELECTION ...

14. (C) Acting Secretary General Ashraf is among party leaders who see the return to democracy as an opportunity to reform the party. One early sign of Sheikh Hasina's degree of commitment to weeding out at least some corruption-tainted political cronies will be the Awami League's list of nominees running for Parliament. The military's Directorate General Forces Intelligence (DGFI), which has been trying to manipulate politics throughout the Caretaker Government's

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rule, recently handed the party a list of 42 Awami League members it said should not run primarily because they were tainted by corruption. Included in the list, a copy of which the Embassy obtained, were several relatives of Sheikh Hasina who have been among her strongest political supporters. Among those relatives were first cousins Sheikh Helal and Abul Hasnat Abdullah (the former Awami League Chief Whip in Parliament) and Kazi Zafrullah (a cousin and Presidium member who usually accompanied Sheikh Hasina on official trips abroad). Ashraf said the DGFI did not demand the Awami League refrain from nominating everyone on the list; instead, he predicted Sheikh Hasina would accede to denying nominations to as little as 30 percent of those named. (Note: DGFI also handed a similar but lengthier blacklist of 102 names to the BNP. End note.)

15. (C) Another indicator of party reform prospects will be the Awami League manifesto that Ashraf said the party will release in early November. Ashraf and others said the manifesto would include a number of measures to promote good governance and weaken the "winner-take-all" political ethos that pervades Bangladeshi politics. Ashraf said he supported measures to ensure Parliament elects a national President that is acceptable to all parties; to scrap a Constitutional requirement that members of Parliament always vote their party's position; and to require Parliamentary standing committees to meet in public except when sensitive security issues are involved. Ashraf also said he backed high-level talks between the Awami League and the BNP to see whether they could agree to a code of behavior under which both parties would be more accommodating to one another. Hasina has not ruled out a pre-election summit with Khaleda Zia to discuss such matters, but Ashraf said he favored a summit only if the parties could first hammer out areas of agreement. Hasina's inner circle has argued against agreeing to a pre-election summit with Zia.

... AND AFTER

16. (C) After the elections, an early sign of Awami League willingness to maintain reforms will be whether it supports

enacting into permanent law the 87 ordinances promulgated to date by the Caretaker Government. Many of the ordinances promote good governance and strengthen local government and judicial independence. Another key to the party's future will be the fate of reform-minded party leaders such as Ashraf, who saw his stock rise within the party during the past year for ably guiding the Awami League in Sheikh Hasina's absence. Other reformers, including Sheikh Hasina's political secretary, Saber Hossain Chowdhury, have not fared as well. In Saber's case, his stock with Sheikh Hasina sank because of his perceived failure to provide sufficiently vocal support in her time of need. Important, too, will be the fate of Presidium members such as Tofail Ahmed and Amir Hossain Amu who are widely perceived to be deeply corrupt (and are on the DGFI's blacklist) and are also among the party leaders who plotted against Sheikh Hasina. They called for greater internal party democracy, not out of a love of reform but out of personal political opportunism. Although reformist Awami League Publicity Secretary Asaduzzaman Noor said both Tofail and Amu hurt the party's image, Ashraf indicated they might stay on the Presidium, at least in the near-term, in the name of party unity.

17. (C) The Awami League boasts a cadre of mid-level leaders with high-level education who could play a significant role in shaping policy if the party returns to power. Among those close to Sheikh Hasina are Dr. Hasan Mahmud, her special personal aide who received a doctorate in environmental chemistry in Belgium, and Dr. Mohammad Abdur Razzaque, the party's agriculture and co-operative secretary who enjoys talking about fertilizer and hydrology nearly as much as politics. Hasan traveled with Hasina to the United States at the start of her medical parole and traveled with her again in October to England, Belgium and Canada. While no party has said much publicly about specific policy platforms, Ashraf and other leaders claimed the Awami League would focus on self-sufficiency in staples such as rice and pulses, energy development, community health, education, and improving governance. Septel will focus on likely Awami League policies and profile some of the leading contenders for Cabinet positions.

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HAS HASINA CHANGED?

18. (C) The big question is whether Sheikh Hasina herself is willing to be an agent of change after 27 years as supreme leader of the Awami League. Razzaque, for one, believes she has changed and will promote better governance. Others are waiting to see what steps she takes upon her return to Bangladesh. Will she axe party leaders she perceives to be insufficiently loyal during her time in jail? Will she secure more positions in the party hierarchy to trusted relatives? Will she or other senior Awami League leaders such as Amu resort to violent street protests as in past campaigns to press their political agenda? Among the questions raised by some Awami League leaders is what, if any, secret promises Sheikh Hasina made to the Caretaker Government as part of the deal that sprung her from prison on medical parole. (Note: There is some speculation whether Hasina agreed not to stand for Parliament. Ashraf insisted she would run. The Government has not said definitively whether Hasina and Zia, both facing graft charges, would be allowed to run. In private conversations with the Ambassador, however, the Government's lead political negotiators did not indicate any attempt to block the two ladies from re-entering Parliament. End note.) Some believe Hasina's sole surviving sister, Sheikh Rehana, might return to Bangladesh during the campaign to serve as a steadying influence. Hasina's son Sajeeb "Joy" Wazed also has emerged as one of his mother's most trusted advisers.

COMMENT: PROMOTING GOOD BEHAVIOR

19. (C) Perhaps the one constant in Bangladeshi politics is all actors -- mainstream political parties, the military and the Government -- place importance on maintaining good relations with the United States. Many pro-democracy reformists have thanked the Embassy for its constant message supporting timely elections and political dialogue. Assistant Secretary Boucher's meeting with Sheikh Hasina therefore is a clear opportunity to again urge her to support reforms and good governance in order to strengthen Bangladesh's historically dysfunctional democracy. By reiterating the importance of acting responsibly in the upcoming elections and of backing democratic reform, Assistant Secretary Boucher would underline the USG's strong opposition to a return to Bangladesh's status quo ante of vindictive, corrupt and violent politics.
Moriarty